

Upheaval in the East: Into the Lithuanian Future

Soviet Union

Lithuanians Unruffled as First Free Election Nears

By BILL KELLER
Special to The New York Times

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., Feb. 22 — On Saturday this Baltic republic is to undertake the closest thing to free elections that the Soviet Union has seen since 1917.

By most forecasts, Lithuania will be the first Soviet venue to vote an end to Communist rule, turning over control of the republic's government to a coalition in which newly legalized non-Communist parties and independents outnumber Communists.

The election is expected to clear the way for a formal declaration of independence, perhaps by April, and for negotiations with Moscow on Lithuania's future military and economic relationship with the Soviet Union.

Yet a visitor who expected to find the air charged with pre-election excitement, the populace dizzy with multi-party pluralism and imminent emancipation, would find instead that most Lithuanians are calm to the point of nonchalance.

Taking the Vote in Stride

"It's like the weather," said Jonas Germanas, an electrical engineer from Kaunas who was waiting for a train at the Vilnius railroad station. "Who gets excited about the weather?"

Lithuanians say there are several reasons they are taking this historic turnout in stride.

For one thing, many voters in Lithuania, and in other republics facing local elections over the coming weeks, have already become somewhat disillusioned with their limited experience of democracy: the quasi-free elections of a Soviet parliament last March have produced no improvements in the Soviet economy.

For another thing, the biggest decision in Lithuanian political life, independence from the Soviet Union, has already been all but made.

Even candidates of the independent Communist Party of Lithuania, which

Independence, a bigger issue, seems all but decided.

broke from Moscow in December, support restoration of the independent statehood that Lithuania lost in 1940. They also seek the removal of Soviet troops from the territory and creation of a separate, free-market economy.

An aide to Algirdas Brazauskas, the Lithuanian Communist Party leader, said the official now favors the idea of making a free Lithuania neutral rather than part of the Warsaw Pact.

A Few Communist Loyalists

"Independence is not the issue," said the aide, Algias Zhukas. "Political independence has already been declared twice."

In May, the Lithuanian parliament declared its autonomy and said its decisions would supersede those taken in Moscow. Two weeks ago, it voted to annul Lithuania's forced annexation into the Soviet Union in 1940.

Only a minority of candidates are campaigning against withdrawal from the Soviet Union, most of them Russians who belong to a Communist Party faction that has remained loyal to Moscow. It is disparagingly referred to here as "the night party" or in the words of one editor, "the Ceausescu party."

Oktiabr Burdenko, director of the 60th Anniversary of the October Revolution electronic instruments factory, is running as a parliamentary candidate of the Communist loyalists.

"I'm against the separation of Lithuania from the Soviet Union," Mr. Burdenko, 64 years old, said Wednesday at a campaign meeting in the factory's

clubhouse, "because now an external factor has appeared: the creation of an extremely powerful Germany, which has already begun to unify."

Applause for a Social Democrat

Only 150 of the factory's 8,000 workers showed up for the pre-election meeting, and they showed little interest in the German threat. After the factory boss vowed to "represent the interest of the workers," one listener stood up to remind him that he was supposed to defend "not the workers," but "the voters, regardless of class."

The workers warmly applauded Mr. Burdenko's rival, Kazimieras Antanavicius, a leader of the Social Democratic Party, after he denounced Communist rule as "worse than feudalism."

In another district, an ethnically mixed residential neighborhood in Vilnius, a candidate of the Greens Party said he was spending most of his time reassuring Russian and Polish voters that independence would not mean hardship for them.

"The Lithuanians already know what they want," the candidate, Jonas Tamulius, said. The Iton-Lithuanians, who make up 20 percent of the republic, are less certain.

About 500 candidates — the numbers change daily because of last-minute withdrawals — are competing to fill 141 seats in the republic's Supreme Soviet, as the parliament is known. Anyone with 250 signatures was allowed to be a candidate.

But Vytautas Bogusis, a 31-year-old leader of the Christian Democrats, said: "You can't consider these to be really free elections. The country is occupied. The mass media is in the hands of the Communist Party."

Coalition Government Is Possible

The largest bloc of candidates, about 200, belongs to the independent Communist Party, which has adopted a platform little different from that of

the Social Democrats.

Public opinion polls in January showed that the party had regained much of its declining stature by breaking with Moscow. But party leaders and outside strategists expect it to end up with a minority.

"The Communist Party will not have a majority, and a coalition government will be necessary," said Mr. Zhukas, who estimates that the party will win 30 to 40 percent of the seats.

Some of the independent party's candidates are Communists of convenience — politicians who have remained in the party to use it as a bargaining tool with Moscow but who cannot be counted upon to follow the party's lead.

Another 80 candidates belong to the loyalist group, which still adheres to Moscow's platform.

The second largest contingent is running under the banner of Sajudis, the Lithuanian popular movement, which has endorsed 146 candidates. Sajudis is not itself a party but a pro-independence umbrella group whose candidates include members of Communist and other parties as well as those with no party affiliation.

The New Political Spectrum

Since the legalization of alternative parties in December, four other parties have put up candidates. The two largest, the Social Democrats, who favor the Swedish model of welfare capitalism, and the Christian Democrats, a more conservative group appealing to the republic's large Catholic population, both trace their roots to Lithuania's period of independence between the two World Wars.

Sajudis strategists predict that their candidates will take 60 to 80 percent of the parliamentary seats, although they are fearful that overconfidence and weariness among voters could mean a low turnout. A majority would give the group the decisive say in appointing a



The New York Times / Feb. 23, 1990

Lithuanians are nonchalant about their first free elections since the Soviet annexation in 1940.

president and replacing the Communist-dominated executive branch with a nonpartisan government.

The makeup of the parliament may be unclear for weeks, until runoff elections are held.

By April, the new parliament is expected to meet and issue a formal declaration of independence, setting in motion a period of disentanglement from Moscow. The Lithuanians would negotiate the fate of Soviet military bases, the ownership of factories, and other ties.

If Moscow puts up a strong resistance, said Algimantas Cekulis, an editor who holds high positions in both the Communist Party and in Sajudis, it will probably be in the form of economic pressure. In that case, he said, the republic is prepared to fight back with nonviolent civil disobedience.

Some candidates favor a popular referendum on independence to demonstrate the republic's feelings to Moscow and the West. Others say this would take too much time.

"It all depends on the situation in Russia," Mr. Cekulis said. "If there are strikes and disorders, maybe we will feel, 'Run while the running is good.'"